

Tennessee Principal's Working Conditions Study

Submitted to the Tennessee Working Conditions Task Force

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Rationale

The growing demands of the role of the principal are felt in nearly all schools and districts, by both novice and seasoned principals. National surveys of practicing principals indicate that even the most successful principals perceive some state and local policies and practices as significant barriers to their ability to make the changes that are necessary for improving schools and student achievement.

The Tennessee Principal's Working Conditions Study was conducted by the SREB Learning-centered Leadership Program at the request of the Tennessee Leadership Redesign Commission's working conditions task force. This study was designed to shed light on the state and local policies, structures and programs that hamper leadership for school improvement.

Several recent reports have focused on highlighting the importance of supportive working conditions in the hiring and sustaining of qualified leaders. In the 2001 Public Agenda report, *Trying to Stay Ahead of the Game: Superintendents and Principals Talk about School Leadership*, principals reported that while they believe they can improve public education, their effectiveness is hampered by politics and bureaucracy (p. 7). They reported facing obstacles in their daily work and routinely contending with "a surfeit of pressures and battles that build up and can threaten to overwhelm them" (p. 8). A vast majority of the principals indicated that their districts have experienced increases in responsibilities and mandates without getting the resources necessary to fulfill them.

The task force is concerned with the impact of policies and conditions not only on current principals but also on the recruitment of qualified candidates and retention of new leaders. A study by The Wallace Foundation found that in certain schools and districts, typically those with large concentrations of poor and minority students, lower per pupil expenditures, and lower salaries, working conditions are seen as stressful and forbidding (2003). Such difficult environments not only heighten burnout among current school leaders, but also deter prospective principal candidates from entering the field.

Methodology

During June/July 2007, the task force invited Tennessee school principals to respond to a web-based SREB survey *Providing Principals the Support to Improve Teaching and Learning* (see Appendix 2). Current principals provided insight into the improvements needed in their district to create the working conditions for effective school leadership. The survey asked principals to

identify the need for improvements in six broad areas identified in national research studies as essential to effective leadership:

- adequate resources to do the job;
- autonomy while being held accountable for results;
- opportunities for professional development throughout a principal's career;
- district-level support for improving student learning;
- clearly defined roles and authority; and
- district-wide focus on improving student learning.

Within each of these areas for improvement, specific working conditions were listed for principals to provide their perception of the degree of improvement each needed in their district (see Table 1). No opportunities for open-ended responses were provided.

Table 1
Principal Working Conditions

Adequate Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Quality staff ▪ Timely data and information ▪ Appropriate facilities and space ▪ Need-based resource allocations
Autonomy and Accountability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ability to recruit, select and place teachers ▪ Ability to move and dismiss teachers ▪ Ability to distribute resources for school's needs and goals ▪ Accountability for school performance
Opportunities for Professional Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ School district commitment to professional learning ▪ Time for leaders to participate in opportunities ▪ Time for leaders to reflect on practices ▪ Opportunities for collaboration and networking outside of the district
District-level Support for Improving Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Clearly articulated mission and vision for the district ▪ Goals and objectives aligned to the district and tailored to the needs of each school ▪ School boards committed to high achievement for all children ▪ District superintendents knowledgeable of curriculum, instruction
Clear Roles and Authority	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ School community support for improvement decisions made by school leaders ▪ Board of Education support for improvement decisions made by school leaders ▪ Central office support for improvement decisions made by school leaders

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Teacher support for improvement decisions made by school leaders
District-wide Focus on Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Clearly defined job expectations and instructional leader role ▪ Regular feedback on job performance ▪ Communication from the top down/bottom up ▪ School board and district personnel who respect the authority of the school leader

Survey Respondents

Over a three week period 380 principals responded to the 28-item survey. Most principals responding were: working in elementary schools (47%), located in rural areas of Tennessee (57%), experienced (4-7 years 33%), and had been at their school 4-7 years (37%). It is recommended that the Commission compare survey respondents with the demographic profile of all principals in the state before using results to impact current policy and practices.

Table 2
Demographics of Survey Respondents

Grade level:	
Elementary	47%
Middle	13
High	23
Combined Elementary/Middle	11
Combined Middle/High	7
School location:	
Rural	59%
Suburban	28
Urban	14
Years as principal:	
1-3 years	22
4-7	33%
8-15	30
16-23	11
24-31	3
32 or more	1
Years as principal in current school:	
1-3 years	35
4-7	37%
8-15	21
16-23	6
24-31	1
32 or more	0

Study Results

Overall, survey respondents indicated that minor improvements were needed in their districts for most conditions. In particular, approximately three-quarters of all respondents identified that ***the following conditions were perceived as needing the least improvement (minor and no need):***

- Clearly articulated mission and vision for the district (80% of respondents)
- Goals and objectives aligned to the district and tailored to the needs of each school (76%)
- Accountability for school performance (75%)
- District superintendents knowledgeable of curriculum, instruction (73%)
- School district commitment to professional learning (73%)

Principals identified only 4 of the twenty-four specific conditions as needing substantive improvement in their districts. ***The following conditions were perceived as needing improvement (significant improvement and improvement needed):***

- Ability to move and dismiss teachers (62% of respondents)
- Need-based resource allocations (58%)
- Appropriate facilities and space (58%)
- Opportunities for collaboration and networking outside of the district (52%)

It should be noted that a number of the conditions were fairly evenly distributed between improvement needed and minor improvement needed. Survey results (see Appendix B) should be reviewed to see the distribution of responses for the remaining 15 conditions.

Disaggregated Results

School Context

Suburban and Rural Principals

Suburban (n=106) and rural (n=222) principals responded similarly in identifying the working conditions needing improvement (significant improvement or improvement needed) in their districts (see Table 3).

Urban Principals

Working conditions for urban Tennessee principals were perceived as needing more significant improvement (see Table 3). Urban respondents (n=51) identified the additional conditions as needing improvement (significant improvement or improvement needed) in their districts:

- Ability to recruit, select and place teachers (57%)
- Ability to distribute resources for school's needs and goals (57%)
- School community support for improvement decisions made by school leaders (57%)
- School board and district personnel who respect the authority of the school leader (53%)
- Board of Education support for improvement decisions made by school leaders (51%)

Table 3
Working Conditions Perceived as Needing the Most Improvement by
Principal's School Context

Conditions Needing Most Improvement	Urban 51 respondents	Rural 222 respondents	Suburban 106 respondents
Ability to move and dismiss teachers (62%)	84%	63%	51%
Need-based resource allocations (58%)	71	54	61
Appropriate facilities and space (58%)	67	55	59
Opportunities for collaboration and networking outside of the district (52%)	59	51	53

School Levels

Elementary Principals

The survey responses of elementary principals mirrored overall findings of the four working conditions needing improvement (significant improvement or improvement needed) in their districts (see Table 4).

Middle School Principals

More working conditions for Tennessee middle school principals were perceived as needing improvement than all principals responding (see Table 4). ***Middle school respondents identified the following additional conditions as needing improvement (significant improvement or improvement needed) in their districts:***

- Timely data and information (60%)
- Time for leaders to reflect on practices (60%)
- Board of Education support for improvement decisions made by school leaders (60%)
- Time for leaders to participate in opportunities (57%)
- Teacher support for improvement decisions made by school leaders (55%)
- Ability to recruit, select and place teachers (55%)
- Ability to distribute resources for school's needs and goals (55%)
- School community support for improvement decisions made by school leaders (54%)
- School boards committed to high achievement for all children (53%)

- School board and district personnel who respect the authority of the school leader (53%)
- Quality staff (51%)

High School Principals

The working conditions Tennessee high school principals perceived as needing the most improvement were slightly different than all principals responding (see Table 4). **High school respondents also identified the following additional conditions as needing improvement (significant improvement or improvement needed) in their districts to a slightly greater degree than opportunities for collaboration and networking outside of the district (49%*):**

- Board of Education support for improvement decisions made by school leaders (54%)
- School community support for improvement decisions made by school leaders (50%)

Table 4
Working Conditions Perceived as Needing the Most Improvement by School Level

Conditions Needing Most Improvement	Elementary 175 respondents	Middle 47 respondents	High 106 respondents
Ability to move and dismiss teachers (62%)	57%	72%	64%
Need-based resource allocations (58%)	50	77	62
Appropriate facilities and space (58%)	53	62	65
Opportunities for collaboration and networking outside of the district (52%)	52	64	49*

Elementary/Middle School Principals

Those principals with buildings that combine elementary and middle school grade levels (91% rural respondents) are slightly greater than all principals responding (see Table 5). **Elementary/middle school respondents identified the following additional conditions as needing improvement (significant improvement or improvement needed) in their districts:**

- Time for leaders to reflect on practices (52%)
- Ability to distribute resources for school's needs and goals (51%)
- Ability to recruit, select and place teachers (50%)

Middle/High School Principals

Principals of combined middle/high school grade levels (85% rural) provided similar responses (see Table 5) to those of middle school leaders. ***Middle/high school respondents identified the following additional conditions as needing improvement (significant improvement or improvement needed) in their districts:***

- Ability to distribute resources for school's needs and goals (69%)
- School board and district personnel who respect the authority of the school leader (65%)
- School community support for improvement decisions made by school leaders (65%)
- Regular feedback on job performance (62%)
- Ability to recruit, select and place teachers (58%)
- Accountability for school performance (58%)
- Time for leaders to reflect on practices (58%)
- Board of Education support for improvement decisions made by school leaders (58%)
- Teacher support for improvement decisions made by school leaders (58%)
- Time for leaders to participate in opportunities (57%)
- Communication from the top down/bottom up (54%)
- Clearly defined job expectations and instructional leader role (54%)
- Central office support for improvement decisions made by school leaders (50%)
- Timely data and information (50%)

Table 5
Working Conditions Perceived as Needing the Most Improvement by
Combined School Level

Conditions Needing Most Improvement	Elementary/Middle 42 respondents	Middle/High 26 respondents
Ability to move and dismiss teachers (62%)	74%	58%
Need-based resource allocations (58%)	56	69
Appropriate facilities and space (58%)	67	58
Opportunities for collaboration and networking outside of the district (52%)	48*	58

Job Experience

1-3 Years Experience as a School Principal

New principals, novice to the job and district, had few working conditions that needed improvement. Their perceptions mirrored the aggregate perceptions of principals in the study (see Table 6).

4-7 Years Experience as a School Principal

Those principals with 4-7 years experience identified more working conditions needing improvement than novice principals (see Table 6). ***Respondents with 4-7 years of experience as a principal identified the following additional conditions as needing improvement (significant improvement or improvement needed) in their districts:***

- School board and district personnel who respect the authority of the school leader (53%)
- School community support for improvement decisions made by school leaders (52%)
- Board of Education support for improvement decisions made by school leaders (50%)

8-15 Years Experience as a School Principal

Principals with 8-15 years experience identified similar working conditions as novice principals (see Table 6). ***Respondents with 8-15 years of experience***

as a principal also identified the following condition as needing improvement (significant improvement or improvement needed) in their districts to a slightly greater degree than opportunities for collaboration and networking outside of the district (46%**):

- School community support for improvement decisions made by school leaders (51%)

16-23 Years Experience as a School Principal

More working conditions for Tennessee principals with 16-23 years experience were perceived as needing improvement than all principals responding (see Table 6). ***Respondents with 16-23 years of experience as a principal identified the following additional conditions as needing improvement (significant improvement or improvement needed) in their districts:***

- Communication from the top down/bottom up (62%)
- Ability to distribute resources for school's needs and goals (57%)
- Time for leaders to reflect on practices (57%)
- Board of Education support for improvement decisions made by school leaders (57%)
- Regular feedback on job performance (57%)
- Time for leaders to participate in opportunities (52%)
- Ability to recruit, select and place teachers (52%)

24-31 Years Experience as a School Principal

Experienced principals, with 24-31 years of experience, ***identified the same four working conditions as their colleagues (see Table 6) with these additional conditions as needing improvement (significant improvement or improvement needed) in their districts:***

- Communication from the top down/bottom up (58%)
- Ability to distribute resources for school's needs and goals (56%)
- Timely data and information (54%)
- Time for leaders to reflect on practices (54%)

Although data was collected for principals with more than 32 years of experience, too few principals (four) in this category responded to the survey to report disaggregated results. Results for principals disaggregated by years of experience in their current school provided no variation from results reported for years of experience as a school principal.

Table 6
Working Conditions Perceived as Needing the Most Improvement by
Years of Experience as a School Principal

Conditions Needing Most Improvement	1-3 Years Experienc e 82 responde nts	4-7 Years Experienc e 126 responde nts	8-15 Years Experienc e 81 responde nts	16-23 Years Experienc e 43 responde nts	24-31 Years Experienc e
Ability to move and dismiss teachers (62%)	50%	68%	59%	62%	63%
Need-based resource allocations (58%)	60	55	57	57	61
Appropriate facilities and space (58%)	59	61	52	52	58
Opportunities for collaboration and networking outside of the district (52%)	51	52	46**	62%	61

Recommendations for Commission Consideration

These results indicate clear directions for the Commission to further investigate. As all subgroups of responding principals indicated, the following working conditions need the most improvement in their districts to be an effective leader. The Commission should look at state and local policies, structures and barriers that hamper:

- The ability of the principal to move and dismiss teachers;
- The district allocating resources based on schools' needs;

- The ability of teachers to effectively teach and students to proficiently learn because of school facilities and space; and
- The principal's opportunities for collaboration and networking outside of the district.

It should be cautioned, though, that though responses were consistent across subgroups, just 52-62% of respondents want more than minor improvements in these areas. Additional study should be undertaken to better understand how these conditions hamper the work of principals in improving student achievement and the cost-benefit of any modifications.

This study also provides promising data that improvements to working conditions identified by principals vary by their school context and number of years on the job. The Commission should place priority on investigating the working conditions of the following principal subgroups:

- Principals of combined middle/high schools
- Principals of middle schools
- Principals in urban settings
- Principals with 16 or more years of experience

These principals perceive that greater improvement to working conditions are needed for them to be effective leaders.

If principals are expected to lead students and staff to higher levels of achievement, then the working environment in schools and districts must be one that facilitates their efforts. SREB recommends further research be done in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the current conditions under which Tennessee school leaders are striving to improve teaching and student learning. Specific recommendations for action will follow more comprehensive study of the areas identified in order to improve the conditions under which they can lead schools to improve teaching and learning.

References

Farkas, S., Johnson, J., Duffett, A., & Foleno, T. (2001). *Trying to stay ahead of the game: Superintendents and principals talk about school leadership*. New York: Public Agenda.

The Wallace Foundation. (2003). *Beyond the pipeline: Getting the principals we need, where they are needed most*. New York: Author.

Adequate resources to do the job are essential to effective leadership. What improvements are needed in your district to provide school principals these resources?						
	Significant improvement needed	Improvement needed	Minor improvement needed	No need to improve	No opinion	Response Count
Quality staff	10.0% (38)	22.9% (87)	48.4% (184)	18.7% (71)	0.0% (0)	380
Timely data and information	13.1% (50)	26.2% (100)	35.7% (136)	24.7% (94)	0.3% (1)	381
Appropriate facilities and space	28.3% (108)	29.7% (113)	24.4% (93)	17.6% (67)	0.0% (0)	381
Need-based resource allocations	23.9% (91)	34.4% (131)	31.0% (118)	10.2% (39)	0.5% (2)	381
	answered question					380
	skipped question					0

Autonomy and accountability for results are essential to effective leadership. What improvements are needed in your district to give school principals autonomy while holding them accountable?						
	Significant improvement needed	Improvement needed	Minor improvement needed	No need to improve	No opinion	Response Count
Ability to recruit, select and place teachers	17.1% (65)	24.7% (94)	28.4% (108)	29.2% (111)	0.5% (2)	380
Ability to move and dismiss teachers	28.2% (107)	34.2% (130)	18.7% (71)	18.7% (71)	0.3% (1)	380
Ability to distribute resources for school's needs and goals	13.9% (53)	33.9% (129)	28.9% (110)	23.1% (88)	0.3% (1)	381
Accountability for school performance	5.5% (21)	19.7% (75)	38.6% (147)	35.7% (136)	0.5% (2)	381
	answered question					380
	skipped question					0

Opportunities for professional development throughout a principal's career are essential to effective leadership. What improvements are needed in your district to provide school principals these opportunities?						
	Significant improvement needed	Improvement needed	Minor improvement needed	No need to improve	No opinion	Response Count
School district commitment to professional learning	8.9% (34)	17.6% (67)	29.9% (114)	43.3% (165)	0.3% (1)	381
Time for leaders to participate in opportunities	16.1% (61)	25.0% (95)	27.6% (105)	31.3% (119)	0.0% (0)	380
Time for leaders to reflect on practices	15.0% (57)	32.3% (123)	34.4% (131)	18.4% (70)	0.0% (0)	381
Opportunities for collaboration and networking outside of the district	20.3% (77)	32.1% (122)	30.0% (114)	16.8% (64)	0.8% (3)	380
	answered question					380
	skipped question					0

A district-wide focus on improving student learning is essential to effective leadership. What improvements are needed in your district to provide this focus for school principals?						
	Significant improvement needed	Improvement needed	Minor improvement needed	No need to improve	No opinion	Response Count
Clearly articulated mission and vision for the district	6.1% (23)	13.9% (53)	25.8% (98)	54.2% (206)	0.0% (0)	380
Goals and objectives aligned to the district and tailored to the needs of each school	7.1% (27)	17.1% (65)	31.1% (118)	44.7% (170)	0.0% (0)	380
School boards committed to high achievement for all children	15.3% (58)	22.9% (87)	22.9% (87)	37.9% (144)	1.1% (4)	380
District superintendents knowledgeable of curriculum, instruction	10.2% (39)	13.1% (50)	26.0% (99)	47.2% (180)	3.4% (13)	381
	answered question					380
	skipped question					0

District-level support for improving student learning is essential to effective leadership. What improvements are needed in your district to provide school principals support for improving student learning?						
	Significant improvement needed	Improvement needed	Minor improvement needed	No need to improve	No opinion	Response Count
School community support for improvement decisions made by school leaders	13.1% (50)	32.3% (123)	33.3% (127)	21.0% (80)	0.3% (1)	381
Board of Education support for improvement decisions made by school leaders	18.2% (69)	28.2% (107)	27.4% (104)	25.3% (96)	1.1% (4)	380
Central office support for improvement decisions made by school leaders	11.8% (45)	17.6% (67)	34.7% (132)	35.5% (135)	0.3% (1)	380
Teacher support for improvement decisions made by school leaders	12.4% (47)	27.6% (105)	44.2% (168)	15.5% (59)	0.3% (1)	380
	answered question					380
	skipped question					0

Clearly defined roles and authority are essential to effective leadership. What improvements are needed in your district to clearly define the role and authority of school principals in improving teaching and learning?						
	Significant improvement needed	Improvement needed	Minor improvement needed	No need to improve	No opinion	Response Count
Clearly defined job expectations and instructional leader role	11.8% (45)	20.0% (76)	34.5% (131)	33.7% (128)	0.0% (0)	380
Regular feedback on job performance	9.4% (36)	22.3% (85)	35.2% (134)	32.8% (125)	0.3% (1)	381
Communication from the top down/bottom up	13.6% (52)	22.3% (85)	35.2% (134)	28.3% (108)	0.5% (2)	381
School board and district personnel who respect the authority of the school leader	19.5% (74)	24.7% (94)	24.5% (93)	29.7% (113)	1.6% (6)	380
	answered question					380
	skipped question					0

What grade level is your school?			
		Response Percent	Response Count
Elementary	<div><div></div></div>	46.5%	175
Middle	<div><div></div></div>	12.5%	47
High	<div><div></div></div>	22.9%	86
Combined Elementary/Middle	<div><div></div></div>	11.2%	42
Combined Middle/High	<div><div></div></div>	6.9%	26
answered question			376
skipped question			4

Where is your school located?			
		Response Percent	Response Count
Urban area	<div><div></div></div>	13.5%	51
Suburban area	<div><div></div></div>	28.0%	106
Rural area	<div><div></div></div>	58.6%	222
answered question			379
skipped question			1

How many years have you been a school principal?			
		Response Percent	Response Count
1-3	<div><div></div></div>	21.8%	82
4-7	<div><div></div></div>	33.4%	126
8-15	<div><div></div></div>	29.7%	112
16-23	<div><div></div></div>	11.4%	43
24-31	<div><div></div></div>	2.7%	10
32 or more	<div><div></div></div>	1.1%	4
answered question			377
skipped question			3

How many years have you been a principal at your current school?				
			Response Percent	Response Count
1-3	<div><div></div></div>		35.2%	133
4-7	<div><div></div></div>		37.0%	140
8-15	<div><div></div></div>		21.4%	81
16-23	<div><div></div></div>		5.6%	21
24-31	<div><div></div></div>		0.8%	3
32 or more			0.0%	0
			answered question	378
			skipped question	2